DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 412 567 CS 216 051

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TITLE Effects of Race, Class, and Gender on Writing: Report from a Longitudinal Study.
PUB DATE 1997-03-14
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (48th, Phoeniz, AZ, March 12-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative (142) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Writing; Case Studies; *Diversity (Student); Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Longitudinal Studies; *Racial Attitudes; Racial Factors; *Sex Role; Social Status; *Student Attitudes; *Writing Attitudes; *Writing (Composition); Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS City University of New York City College

ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of race, class, and gender on writing. Data from the 6-year longitudinal study was carried out from 1989 to 1995 at City College of City University of New York. Subjects were African-American, Latino, Asian, and White students enrolled in three composition classes, one at each of the two levels of basic writing and one at the freshman composition level. Students were interviewed twice each semester throughout their college years. Papers written in all classes and copies of all institutional writing tests students were required to take were collected. Classroom observations were carried out during the last 5 years of the study. Two case study reports are presented of students' statements about writing development. In one of the two case studies, results indicated that the subject was, through her college education, moved from a position of a "wannabe White girl" to a proud African-American woman who recognizes the necessity of changing the stereotypes of African-American women in films and television. In the second of the two case studies, the subject began by denying his Latino background, desiring to be accepted as a true "American," but came to take as his cause the changing perceptions about homosexuals. These students' writings and interviews reveal that they, as members of minority groups, are capable of looking at the problems they must face in society in focused ways that can change the quality of that society. (Contains 4 references.) (CR)

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Paper presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication
Phoenix, AZ March 14, 1997

Effects of Race, Class, and Gender on Writing: Report from a Longitudinal Study

In The Construction of Negotiated Meaning (1994), Linda Flower raised the important question: "How do constraints such as gender, race and class, ideology, prior knowledge, strategic repertoire, goals, and awareness affect [the writing] process?" (p.106). Patricia Sullivan's review of Flower's book in College English (1995) points out that Flower asked the right questions, but failed to answer the "more pressing questions it raises for literacy education. When the social is shorn from cognition, when gender, race, ethnicity, class, and ideology are rendered invisible to analysis, cognition is made to assume a burden of explanation greater than it can bear" (p. 956).

Data from a six-year longitudinal study (Sternglass, in press), carried out from 1989 to 1995 at The City College of City University of New York, can begin to provide some answers to Flower's questions. The population in this study included African-American, Latino, Asian, and White students who were enrolled in three classes of composition, one at each of the two levels of basic writing and one at the freshman composition level. Students were interviewed twice each semester throughout their college years. Papers written in all classes were collected as well as copies of all institutional writing tests students were required to take. In addition, classroom observations, especially in students' major areas, were carried out during the last five years of the study. In the time available for this paper, I will provide two brief case study reports of the students' statements about writing development as well as examples of their writing that reflect the effects of social class, race, and gender and sexual orientation on their evolving attitudes and accomplishments in the academic setting. It will be seen that these factors in students' lives added to their ability to analyze, critique, and modify their own views as well as the academic views they encountered.

Chandra, an African-American student, was placed into the second level basic writing class on the basis of her performance on the college's Writing Assessment Test. An examination of her paper on the timed, impromptu test reveals that she wrote a first draft, and then ran out of time before she could complete a second draft. Her readers took no notice of this attempt to use the writing process effectively, and she was placed into the basic writing class because she had not completed the second draft. She wrote tellingly of her recognition of her complex identity in a paper for the composition course her first semester at the college:

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> Similar to [Richard] Rodriguez, I felt that when I became a student I was "remade." The language I was used to speaking was based upon slang terms. All of the schools I attended allowed me to speak and write with incorrect English. I learned the correct pronunciations of words in drama class. Recently, here at City College, I have a gained a new identity which I feel that I don't identify with. I am referred to as an African-American. Similar to Rodriguez experiences, I've never connected myself to this racial minority so I feel guilty representing a culture I knew nothing about. I spent all of my life trying to overcome my race and color in order to produce as part of the American society. But I have realized, one cannot move forward unless they know where they have been. Now, I feel like I've missed out on something since I don't know anything about African history or African culture. My peers always viewed me as a "wanna be" white girl because I tried correcting my speech and speaking intelligently. When I tried to imitate the slang later in my teens, everyone could always tell I did not belong.
>
> I always believed that I had to give up my culture to be taken seriously as an intellectual, I later realized that I didn't.

Chandra became a communications major, and her identity as a proud African-American woman grew over her college years. In interviews and papers written between 1991 and 1993, her third, fourth, and fifth years at the college, she demonstrated her growing awareness of the characterization of African-American women in the media, and she came to resolve to change those stereotypes. For an introductory communications course in 1991, Chandra reviewed the film Boyz N the Hood, drawing on her own experiences to evaluate the depiction of African-American women:

> "Boyz N the Hood" can be viewed as an educational film based upon real life events that occur in inner city black communities. As an African-American woman living in a crime infested neighborhood, I speak from experience. Many crimes in my neighborhood are not reported, therefore no legal action is taken. John Singleton, the director decided to take a stand, by addressing these issues, giving the audience an insider's view of what goes on in the "hood."
>
> ...For the most part, the director of this film should be commended. However, if there is one thing I could change in this movie, I would include some positive images of black women. Each woman in this film was depicted as either being ignorant, addicted to drugs, negligent mothers or referred to as "bitches, hoochies or ho's [whores]." Even the actress who plays Tres "educated" mother did not know how to make a U-turn or park her car.

Chandra's complaint echoes that of Jacquelyn Jones Royster (1992) who had objected to the depiction of all Blacks and Hispanics as a monolithic group in a negative way.

In the fall of 1993, her fifth year at the college, Chandra wrote a paper titled, "The Media Image of Black Women: Mammies, Sapphires, and Jezebels." In this paper, Chandra argued that "television perpetuates and reinforces cultural stereotypes. Thus viewers must become critical thinkers and decoders of this information that we are force-fed every day." But then she went on to ask, "But who controls what we see?" Arguing that television programming is controlled by "white males," she questions how "black women are portrayed in situation comedies." Seen as "Mammies" (servants responsible for domestic duties and raising children), "Sapphires" (talkative and sassy), or "Jezebels" (shapely seductresses who use their sexuality to get their way), "blacks were locked into stereotypes" as the only way of even being included in television programs. Citing the research of others, Chandra noted that television has "evolved from just being a tool for escapism to become the myth makers, the story teller and the passer of old cultural ideas." She also argued that "television's unspoken motive was to sell the 'American dream,' a white way of life and values to the American public." Here we see that two years after Chandra expressed her initial indignation at the stereotyping of Black women, she has moved to a critical analysis of the effects of such stereotyping and its damage to women like herself.

It was not surprising, then, that in an interview later that semester, Chandra told me that she was now considering becoming a director rather than an actress. She said, "A director is more in control, hires others. I'm unhappy with the images of Black women in film. I either want to be on camera or behind it--in a decision-making position, creating images." Chandra had come to recognize that positions of power were essential to bringing about change in the way race and gender were depicted to the larger public. As she became more confident about her own identity as an African-American woman, she sought to create the images that would depict her and others like her.

Issues of cultural and personal identity are frequently tied closely to questions of the desirability of assimilating into the dominant culture. One student who grappled with the intersections of these matters over the years was Carl, an American-born student of parents who had emigrated from Ecuador. Carl was placed directly into the freshman writing course and never evidenced any serious writing problems. As his papers reflect, he distanced himself from the cultural practices of his Ecuadorian family, partly, it appears, to become more Americanized himself, but also as a way of protecting his identity as a homosexual from his parents, from whom he anticipated a hostile response. In papers he wrote for the freshman composition course, he overtly discussed his conflicting feelings about cultural identity and assimilation. In papers written for later courses, and in interviews I had with him over the years, he more openly confronted the implications of his homosexuality and his relationship with family, friends, and colleagues where he worked.

In papers written for the freshman composition course, Carl forcefully described the estrangement between his parents and himself:

> ...In my own experience, I can see the barrier education has created between my parents and myself. Our conversations must be short and on uncontroversial topics. Once a debate begins, the yelling starts as well. I dismiss their opinions because they are Spanish opinions or I'll say, "This is America, if you don't like it go back to Ecuador."
>
> ...Unfortunately, when it comes to social attitudes, immigrant parents can be narrow minded, at least in my experiences. I have dealt with Spanish friends and relatives who are so prejudiced that I have trouble speaking to them without getting angry. This has been one reason I keep my friends away from home. I would not subject them to that. This causes the break in social situations. I will not associate with my parents or their friends nor will I bring friends to meet them. We are from two different worlds when it comes down to the people we associate with.

Carl had no desire to attach himself to the cultural community that provided comfort and support for his parents. At this point, his disregard for his parents' views was unabashed. He was not yet as secure and open about his homosexuality as he would be in the next few years, so he felt it was safer to keep himself distanced from his family.

Although he was critical of what he termed the prejudice of Spanish friends and relatives, he seemed oblivious to the effects of stereotyping done by others to those of Latino backgrounds. In papers also written for the freshman composition course, he took no offense at derogatory characteristics being applied to those of his background since he believed himself to be so totally Americanized that none of the epithets could possibly apply to him. In one paper, he described an experience he had had in high school:

> I've never been stereotyped as a "typical hispanic" in a mean-spirited way. In high school, the lunchroom was filled with racial jokes. There I was typecast as a "typical hispanic" which meant I was on welfare, that I came from a big family, that there was numerous possibilities on who my natural father was, that I carried a switchblade, that I wore lots of multicolored outfits and that I stole car radios in my spare time when I wasn't eating rice and beans or dealing drugs on the corner. The guys saying these things meant it as a joke and I took it as one. These things don't bother me as anyone who does feel that way is not going to change.

It is striking that Carl genuinely seemed to take no offense at these stereotypical characteristics, believing that since they did not apply to him, they were harmless in being applied to others. Unlike Chandra, he had no commitment to change the stereotyped views of those that held them.

In a series of interviews and papers written from the spring of 1992 through the spring of 1993, Carl's third and fourth years at the college, Carl increasingly asserted his pride in his sexual

orientation and his commitment to the community of homosexuals, something he had earlier been reluctant to do. In an interview in the spring of 1992, Carl told me that he was taking a creative writing class. He said, "It took me a while to really settle in and have total strangers read [my writing]." For this class, he wrote a short story that allowed him to examine his feelings toward publicly acknowledging his homosexual identity through a character he called Brad. In the excerpt I will present, Brad and another character, Fray, are having a conversation in a gay bar in which Brad has expressed his feelings of uneasiness:

> Fray gets up from his stool and approaches Brad. "Come over here," he motions off to the side. "I want to talk to you."
>
> "Okay," Brad responds, with the uneasiness magnifying.
>
> "You have to loosen up, Brad. Relax. Can I be honest with you?"
>
> "Sure," Brad answers wondering where the conversation was going.
>
> "Did you come out recently?" Fray asks.
>
> "Last year," Brad whispers, trying to ignore the imagined stares. "Last year," he repeats a little louder, the burning sensation on the back of his neck lessening.
>
> "Take it easy," Fray says in a soothing tone. "I thought it was something like that. Did you know earlier?"
>
> Giving into Fray's powerful stare and apparent sincerity, Brad answers, "Since I was ten years old."
>
> "That's good. I hate people who just all of a sudden say they're gay. That's such bullshit. When you're gay, you just know! You might deny it but you're always that way. I come here so that I can relax and have fun. I'm a faggot, Brad, and you are one too." Brad flinches, turning away from Fray's pointed stare. "In here I'm allowed to be free from what the world outside those doors wants--no--expects to see. If you can't even be comfortable here then I know something's wrong. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Fray asks with a thoughtful smile.
>
> "Yes...Not entirely. I can't be the way some of these people are," Brad says as he gestures with his hand. "I can't swish around or talk one way or another or..." Again Brad finds himself cut off, this time feeling a short sensation of anger about the interruption.
>
> "Damn it, it's not about swishing round and wearing flaming clothes or anything like that. It's about accepting yourself and being comfortable. It's a tough world out there, Brad. We live in a heartless world. Yes, this place can be cruel too but we all share something special. It forces us all together.
>
> ..."What do I do? He's so sure of himself and of me. I don't want to let him down." Brad thinks to himself. "Damn it, didn't you hear a word of what he was saying? Don't let yourself down. Relax." Brad gives into the meaning of Fray's words. For the rest of the

night he tells himself not to worry. "Take it slow," he thinks and starts moving to the music. They dance.

Through this story, and a later play he wrote in which he used his own name and told how he revealed his homosexuality to his mother and sisters, Carl revealed his growing comfort with his identity as a gay man. His ability to share his homosexuality with his family was a true turning point for him. Though he made it clear that his father could never be told about his homosexuality, Carl had been helped by the acceptance of his friends, colleagues, classmates, and professors, all of whom seem to have supported him. Getting the message to his family allowed him to overcome the final hurdle that would now permit him to become a public advocate for the needs of others as well as himself.

In the spring of 1993, Carl wrote a paper for a psychology course in which he described how his own sense of identity and community had changed since he had started at the college in the fall of 1989. In the paper, titled "Homophobia: Why, How, and Who?" he described how his perceptions of gay individuals changed over time. A section of the paper was titled, "Who is homophobic?":

> Unfortunately, because everyone has a little bit of prejudice within them, it is simply a matter of degree.
>
> I have been guilty of being homophobic. Back in 1989, I was on my way to work and I happened by Central Park where the Gay Pride Parade participants were gathering. At that point in time, I was still struggling with my sexual orientation. I was put off, almost scared of the men in drag, the very masculine women, the leather crowd, the pierced bodies of some of the participants and all the "oddities" of the parade. My mind wasn't able to deal with the shock of it all. I was scared that I would turn into one of them, never realizing that there were people within the gay community who weren't like that, that if nothing else, our community was about diversity and that everyone had to be accepted. Just as I wanted to be accepted by my straight friends, I would have to be willing to accept gay people who were different from me.

Here, Carl vigorously rejected the stereotyping of gay people that he seemed oblivious to when the stereotyping was applied to Latinos.

That same semester, Carl attended the "March for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Rights" in Washington, D.C., his most overt public acknowledgment of his homosexual identity. In a paper he wrote for his journalism class, Carl described some newspaper coverage of the march, and then he provided his own analysis of the significance of the event:

> The march on Washington showed America the diversity of the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual community. The participants, in all shapes, sizes and colors, were individuals who represent all walks of life. And no matter what the count of the marchers was, 300,000 or

> 1.1 million, the impact remained the same: American saw us as human beings, real people, individuals, rather than strange, unusual or dangerous people who ought to be shunned. Despite the differences among us, all of the speeches that afternoon echoed the same theme: unity, perseverance, and the need to combat ignorance about homosexuality relentlessly. We want people to know who we are; indeed, this goal is imperative. We will not step back into the closets that confined us.

Carl's clear identification with the marchers is apparent through his use of words like "us" and "we" which indicate his oneness with the marchers and the causes they represent. It is evident that Carl not only accepts but revels in his identity as a gay man, but it appears that he had to abandon his Latino roots to accomplish this.

Through longitudinal research, it is possible to examine the changes that occur in students' world views and academic views as they go through their college years. The excerpts from interviews and student writing presented here give only brief glimpse of how students relate the facts of their lives and backgrounds to the attitudes and values of the society around them. Thus, through her college education, Chandra is moved from a position of a "wannabe white girl" to a proud African-American woman who recognizes the necessity of changing the stereotypes of African-American women in films and television. Carl, in his desire to be accepted as a true "American," essentially denies his Latino background, but takes as his cause the changing of perceptions of homosexuals.

Should we think of race, gender and sexual orientation, and social class only as "topics" that students write about during their college years, or should we probe more deeply and ask ourselves what the effects of these factors have been on the students' academic lives. How have these factors sensitized them to the justices and injustices of the society in which they are living. How can they productively work to bring about the changes that will improve the lives of others of their background as well as the larger society? Their writings and interviews reveal that these students, as members from minority perspectives, are capable of looking at the problems they must face in the society in focused ways that can change the quality of the society. They have developed analytical styles that lead them first to the questioning of existing assumptions and then to the recognition that they must be active participants in bringing about change. We must learn to respect the world-knowledge and experience students from multi-cultural backgrounds bring to the academic world and incorporate these views into the value system of the larger society.

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